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AUTHOR Chambliss, Catherine; Downie, Denise
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ABSTRACT

Recent Census Bureau statistics indicate that the two-paycheck family is now the norm, even among families with young children. This study examined the effects during their childhood on their own career and family expectations of college students' (N=170) mothers' employment status. Subjects were divided into three groups on the basis of maternal work status during their childhood. Maternal work status was categorized as either full-time employment (N=46), part-time employment (N=50), or not employed (N=51). Subjects from single parent households were excluded when calculating results. Analysis of variance revealed that subjects viewed maternal employment as more beneficial to children if their mothers were employed full-time. Conversely, subjects whose mothers did not work viewed maternal employment as more detrimental to children. Female subjects with full-time employed mothers were significantly more likely to expect to work during their children's infancy and preschool years. Maternal work history did not affect female subjects' plans to work once their children reached school age and also did not affect males' expectations. Results also showed that subjects with unemployed mothers believed that their freedom while growing up was obstructed more than did subjects whose mothers worked part-time or full-time. (Author/LLL)

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Young Adults' Views of their Mothers' Employment:

Boon, Burden, or Both

Catherine Chambliss, PhD.

Denise Downie, B.S.

Ursinus College

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Abstract

The present study examines the effects of students' mothers' employment status during their childhood on their own career and family expectations. Maternal work status was categorized as either fulltime employment (n=46), parttime employment (n=50), or not employed (n=51). A questionnaire was administered to 170 intro-to-psych students at Ursinus College. Subjects ranged in age from 17 to 26 years old. Subjects from single parent households were excluded when calculating results. Subjects were divided into three groups on the basis of maternal work status during their childhood (6 to 12 years old). Oneway ANOVA revealed that subjects viewed maternal employment as more beneficial to children if their mothers were employed fulltime. Conversely, subjects whose mothers did not work viewed maternal employment as more detrimental to children. Female subjects with fulltime employed mothers were significantly more likely to expect to work during their children's infancy and preschool years. Maternal work history did not affect female's plans to work once their children reached school age and also did not affect males' expectations. Results also showed that subjects with unemployed mothers believed that their freedom while growing up was obstructed more so than subjects whose mothers worked parttime or fulltime.

Introduction

Recent Census Bureau statistics indicate that the two-paycheck family is now the norm, even among families with young children (including those under one year of age. In fact, the rate of maternal employment for two-parent families with school age children is at least 71% and this figure continues to rise each year (Hoffman, 1989). In light of this, much research has been done to investigate the effects of maternal employment on infants, children, and adolescents.

In making career decisions, many mothers continue to worry about the long term consequences of their choices to return to the workplace when their children are still young. To date, there have been few empirical studies of adult children's perceptions of the impact of their mother's employment status. Although much is known about the short term consequences of maternal employment (based on studies of young children), there are relatively few investigations using adolescent samples and even fewer using adult subjects. Here we hope to review the available literature, and present research findings on college students' views of the effects of maternal work status on their lives and their career and family plans.

There has been considerable debate over whether maternal employment is beneficial or detrimental for children. Over the years many researchers have postulated global negative cognitive, academic, emotional and self-esteem repercussions of maternal employment. To date, nearly four decades of work has failed to affirm the majority of pessimistic predictions about the children of employed women. Most studies have found very few differences between children grouped on the basis of maternal work status (Hoffman, 1989).

Many have suggested that much of the struggle found in today's two-paycheck family parents will disappear when members of the next generation become parents because so many themselves were reared in this "nontraditional" type of family.

According to this argument, it is the incongruity of having been a child in a "traditional" family (where the father is the sole employed adult) while living out one's adult life in a "nontraditional" family (where both parents are employed) that fuels the pandemic conflict, guilt, and anxiety that beset two-paycheck families of the '90s.

Having childhood experiences with an employed mother could certainly affect one's perceptions about the appropriateness of maternal employment and affect one's own lifestyle choices and adjustment. Perhaps having an employed mother will equip future husbands with an outlook that will enable them to cope more effectively with the demands of being a father in a two-paycheck household.

Recent studies have found that, although there is no direct correlation between maternal work status and the father's satisfaction with the quality of his marriage, maternal employment may be problematic for fathers with traditional sex role ideologies (Kessler and McRae, 1982). In addition to husband's sex-role attitudes, negative effects on the father are also mediated by social class and the extent to which the father in the dual-earner family participates in child care. It has been suggested that, especially in the blue-collar class, negative correlations between maternal employment and the father's morale are the result of the

prevalent belief that fathers derive their sense of self-esteem from their role of breadwinner (Kessler and McRae, 1982). Thus, a man with this traditional belief would feel threatened by an employed wife who shares the role of breadwinner. This perceived blow to the father's self-esteem could be at the root of family conflicts, which would lead him to report negative feelings about his dual-earner marriage.

The experience of being reared by an employed mother may have an even greater impact on daughters. Daughters of employed mothers have been shown to be more egalitarian in their sex role attitudes (Knoblach and Chambliss, 1989; Brogan and Kutner, 1976; Meier, 1972; Gardner and LeBreque, 1986). Daughters of employed women tend to be more career oriented, more ambitious (Almquist and Angrist, 1971) and more often tend to plan to go to college (Hoffman, 1974). In a summary of the literature Hoffman notes that the most egalitarian ideologies held by women of employed mothers, were those whose mothers held high status jobs (Hoffman, 1974).

Crouter, et al. (1987) also performed a study to investigate the effects of maternal employment on family conflicts. In a sample of 40 blue collar married couples with a baby or toddler, fathers with employed wives reported significantly more arguments with and complaints from their wives than did fathers with non-employed wives. The experimenters proposed that dual-earner fathers may be expected to do more than single-earner fathers in terms of child care. Thus the increased amount of conflict in dual-earner families may be the result of wives pressuring their husbands to participate more in child care. The experimenters also suggested that this pattern might only occur for married, employed parents whose dual-earner lifestyles do not match their own preferences and expectations for married life (Crouter, Perry-Jenkins, Huston and McHale, 1987). Other investigators have also agreed that an important variable in mediating marital conflicts is a match between husbands' preferences regarding whether or not they work outside the home (Kessler and McRae, 1982). These preferences are almost certainly shaped in part by beliefs about the consequences of maternal employment on children.

In a study regarding children's perceptions of their parents, (Knaub, 1986), adolescent and young adult children of dual-career families were surveyed as to their satisfaction with this lifestyle, perceptions of family strength, and views on various issues related to the dual-career lifestyle. In general, children rated their families relatively high on perceptions of family strengths such as concern, respect, and support. The subjects mentioned having positive role models, financial security and the opportunity to develop independence as possible benefits of growing up in a dual-career family. The subjects also indicated that time constraints were the primary problems they had with both of their parents working. However, these children were highly supportive of their parents' dual-career lifestyle and they indicated that they thought the benefits of maternal employment outweighed the disadvantages.

A study of college student attitudes by Chambliss, Owens, and Carr (1991) provided no support for "working mother" guilt and anxiety. When compared with

students from families with nonemployed mothers, students from two-paycheck families did not report greater family discord. They also showed no greater tendency to blame their mothers for childhood or current problems (social, esteem, intellectual, or academic). Students reported admiring mothers who worked fulltime most, mothers who worked parttime next, and nonemployed mothers least.

The only consistently perceived "casualties" of maternal employment were perceptions of the mother's happiness and quality of her marriage. Many students whose mothers were employed fulltime during the subjects' infancy or preschool years reported the belief that their mothers "would have been happier" and their marriages "would have been better" had their mothers' work status been different. However, it is important to note that even here, the majority of students with fulltime employed mothers did not perceive maternal work status as having compromised either mothers' happiness or marriage quality.

The present study was performed in order to gain a better understanding of the relationship between maternal employment and college students' beliefs about the consequences of maternal employment and their own plans for future workplace involvement. While many previous studies have investigated the effects of maternal employment, this is one of the first to assess its impact on cognitions of a young adult sample.

Method

Subjects:

The subjects used in this study were 170 college students. The sample consisted of 78 men and 92 women who were enrolled in an introductory psychology course at Ursinus College in Pennsylvania. The subjects ranged in age from 17 to 26 years old.

Procedure:

The packet used in this study was handed out to subjects in the introductory psychology class in which they were enrolled. Subjects were asked to fill out the packet in its entirety. Ample time was given to the students to complete the questionnaire packet. The packet used in this study consisted of four different parts.

In part one, subjects were asked to provide demographic information and to answer questions concerning their career and family expectations. These questions required subjects to disclose information concerning their expectations about family plans, job type, job characteristics, and work preference based on the age of their youngest child. Subjects were also asked 10 questions concerning their attitudes toward their mother and father. These questions required subjects to indicate their degree of agreement with each statement on a 4 point Likert scale.

Part two of the packet was made up of the BACMEC questionnaire (Greenberger et al. 1988). The BACMEC is a 24-item scale developed to measure Beliefs About the Consequences of Maternal Employment for Children. The

BACMEC included beliefs about both benefits (13 items) and costs (11 items). Studies of five samples (n=375) have demonstrated that the total BACMEC scale and its subscales are highly reliable and have good convergent, divergent, and concurrent validity (Greenberger et al. 1988).

In part three of the packet, subjects were asked to disclose information about their mother's work status at each stage of development. The stages of development were infancy (birth to 1 1/2 years old), preschool (2 to 5 years old), childhood (6 to 12 years old), and adolescence (13 to 18 years old). The subjects were asked to report whether their mothers were employed parttime, fulltime, or not employed outside the home during each stage of development. Subjects also disclosed information about their mother's job, indicating whether it was professional, white collar, or blue collar work. Subjects were also asked to indicate whether or not they had been raised in a single parent household.

Part four of the packet consisted of the CAS, the Childhood Appraisal Scale (Chambliss, Owens, & Carr 1991). The CAS is an 18-item questionnaire designed to measure the subject's perception of the consequences of their mother's work status. The subjects were asked to rate each item on a scale from 1 to 4 depending on how strongly they agreed or disagreed with each statement. The statements permitted subjects to indicate if they felt their lives would have been different if their mother's work status had been different when they were growing up. This allowed an assessment of the perceived impact of fulltime and parttime maternal employment, as well as unemployment.

Results

Subjects were divided into three groups on the basis of maternal work status during their childhood (6 to 12 years old). Maternal work status was categorized as either fulltime employment (n=46), parttime employment (n=50), or not employed (n=51). Subjects from single parent households were excluded from these analyses. Oneway ANOVAs revealed few significant differences among subjects based on maternal work status during childhood.

Scores on the two BACMEC subscales ("benefits" and "costs" of maternal employment) were calculated for each subject by adding the directionally adjusted item values. Maternal work status during childhood was significantly associated with differences in beliefs about the beneficial effect of maternal employment on children ($p < .05$). Subjects viewed maternal employment as more beneficial to children if their mothers were employed fulltime ($x=51.82$, s.d.=7.63). Subjects whose mothers were working outside the home parttime viewed maternal employment as the least beneficial to children ($x=47.53$, s.d.=7.76). Subjects whose mothers were not employed scored between the two other groups ($x=49.80$, s.d.=8.34).

Conversely, subjects whose mothers did not work outside the home viewed maternal employment as more detrimental to children ($p < .001$, $x=38.90$, s.d.=9.44). Subjects viewed maternal employment outside the home as least detrimental if their mothers were employed fulltime ($x=30.84$, s.d.=9.35). Subjects whose mothers were employed parttime scored between the other groups

(x=35.73, s.d.=9.60).

Frequencies for the dichotomous variables concerning subjects' work expectations during their children's infancy (0 to 1 1/2 years old) and preschool (2 to 5 years old) were separately calculated for males and females for the three maternal work status groups. Female subjects displayed a significant work expectation difference based on maternal work status. Female subjects whose mothers were employed fulltime were significantly more likely to expect to work during their children's infancy (40.9%) and preschool (73.7%) years. Subjects were least likely to expect to be employed during their children's infancy (14.8%) and preschool (40.7%) years if their mothers were employed parttime. Subjects whose mothers were not employed had expectations of working during their children's infancy (19.0%) and preschool (60.9%) years that fell between the other two groups.

Maternal work status did not significantly affect female subjects' expectations of working once their children were of school age (the majority [77%] expect to work at that time). Maternal work status did not affect male subjects' expectations of their own working at any stage of their children's development (0 to 18 years old). Also, maternal work status did not affect male subject's expectations of their spouse's working at any stage of their children's development.

Oneway ANOVAs were performed on the CAS items to determine significant differences among subjects whose mothers were employed full-time or part-time, or not employed. Subjects with mothers who were not employed believed that their mothers' work status obstructed their freedom significantly more while they were growing up ($p < .01$, x=2.05, s.d.=0.99) than subjects whose mothers were employed either fulltime (x=1.57, s.d.=0.62) or parttime (x=1.64, s.d.=0.69). The results of the other CAS items showed that, aside from on this one item, young adults did not perceive their mothers' work status as having significantly affected their developmental experiences during childhood.

Discussion

The present findings suggest that maternal employment history affected students' perception of the costs and benefits associated with having a working mother. In general, there was a tendency for students to endorse their own family's lifestyle as optimal, whatever it was. Regardless of their mothers' employment status, few students blamed negative developmental experiences and outcomes on that status.

Subjects whose own mothers worked fulltime during their childhood viewed maternal employment as more beneficial and less detrimental to children than those whose mothers were either unemployed or only employed parttime. Possibly the subjects whose mothers worked fulltime were able to reap the benefits of a two paycheck family in a way which outweighed the disadvantages associated with this lifestyle (Knaub 1986). These subjects also attributed having received a greater amount of freedom while growing up to their mothers' employment status. Since these subjects were granted greater freedom as children, they may be more likely to value independence, and consequently may respect their employed mothers'

financial independence. Therefore, these subjects may be more likely to understand their mothers' desire to be a part of the work force, because they themselves might more strongly desire financial independence in their own lives. If mothers are working fulltime, not only do they contribute substantially to the household's income, but they may also be an additional positive role model to their children. The mothers' ability to successfully meet the demands of the workplace, in addition to the demands of home, may contribute to children's confidence and security when they contemplate their own work lives.

Somewhat unexpectedly, subjects viewed maternal employment as least beneficial to children if their mothers were employed parttime. It is possible that they may also have failed to experience the full advantages of maternal employment associated with greater freedom and responsibility for children. Subjects in the parttime maternal work status group rated their freedom while growing up at a level in between the ratings of the two other maternal work status groups. Children of parttime working mothers had more freedom than children of unemployed mothers, but had less freedom than children of fulltime employed mothers.

However, another explanation of our findings is that since the BACMEC mainly measures perception of the benefits and costs associated with fulltime maternal employment (the first item specifies fulltime employment, and three of the benefit subscale items specify fulltime; no mention of parttime employment is made on any item), the subjects whose mothers worked parttime may have merely been endorsing their own mothers' choice by not strongly advocating the advantages of fulltime maternal employment. It could be that these subjects felt that the parttime work arrangement had worked optimally for their families, and they didn't give higher ratings on the benefits scale because they felt they had experienced these advantages without a fulltime employed mother.

Alternatively, it is possible that although parttime maternal employment is viewed by many as an ideal solution, perhaps the low estimates of benefits to children given by these subjects suggest a less positive picture. Mothers being employed parttime are often pulled in several different directions at once. As a group, they tend to value traditional maternal behavior somewhat more highly than mothers who work fulltime. As a consequence, they may experience greater guilt when work demands compete for their limited attention. If these mothers communicated such ambivalence to their offspring, it could account for their children's less positive perception of maternal employment. Anshensel and Pearlin (1987) found that when women who are primarily concerned with their role as "mother" take on the added role of "paid employee" they may experience an overload of responsibilities. This overload can cause additional strain and conflict within the mother's daily schedule, which in turn adds strain and conflict to their children's lives (due to the requirement that they participate more in household chores and responsibilities). During the times when the mother is not working outside the home, the children get used to her being there to support them and aid them in their daily activities. On the other hand, during the times the mother is working, the children are forced to take care of themselves and make their own responsible and independent decisions. This adjustment may be difficult for some

children, who find their expectations of their mothers repeatedly unrealized. Children who had to deal with their mothers continually switching roles from nearby caretaker to distant working woman may have built up resentment toward their mother for the extra strain, confusion, and conflict she caused them. However, it is important to note that these subjects whose mothers were employed parttime did not describe maternal employment as particularly detrimental to children; their scores on the scale measuring the perceived detrimental effects of maternal employment fell in between the other two groups. Although they did not see a mother's working fulltime as especially beneficial to her children, they did not see it as particularly harmful either. Apparently whatever drawbacks they experienced as children of employed women were not so pronounced as to make them highly critical of maternal employment. Their own personal experiences may have been positive enough to dissuade them from endorsing the cultural myth that maternal employment is harmful to children. They themselves presumably did not experience many of the negative consequences often attributed to maternal employment, and accordingly their attitudes reflect this. The fact that their attitudes were less positive than those of subjects whose mothers worked fulltime may have been due to their own mothers' greater ambivalence about a nontraditional role.

Subjects whose mothers were unemployed viewed maternal employment as significantly more detrimental than subjects in the other two maternal work status groups. Since the unemployed mothers were home more than the employed mothers, their children probably learned to rely on their mothers more and were more dependent on maternal assistance and guidance. Possibly, subjects whose mothers were not employed viewed maternal employment as most detrimental because they felt they received more support and stability because their mothers were fulfilling their traditional sex role of staying home and taking care of the children. In addition, they had no direct personal experiences to challenge the widely held negative portrayal of the impact of maternal employment. However contrary to expectation, subjects whose mothers were not employed fell in between the two other groups in their belief of how beneficial maternal employment is to children. Subjects whose mothers were not employed may have believed maternal employment to be somewhat beneficial for any of three reasons. First, they may recognize that maternal employment can improve the financial standing of the family. Second, past studies have shown that unemployed mothers reported significantly lowered self-esteem and greater depression at times when increased family stress was perceived (Schwartberg and Dytell 1988). For some of these subjects, exposure to a depressed mother with poor self-esteem may have had adverse effects resulting from reduced maternal responsiveness. These subjects may see maternal employment as a means of increasing a mothers' self-esteem and happiness with indirect beneficial consequences for children. A third possibility as to why subjects in the unemployed maternal work status group believed that maternal employment is somewhat beneficial is based on their reaction to their perceived freedom while growing up. Subjects whose mothers were unemployed felt that they had less freedom while growing up when compared to the other two maternal work status groups and attributed this at least in part to their mothers' not working. Since children generally value freedom, they may view

maternal employment as more beneficial because it would have contributed to an increase in their freedom.

The mixed attitudes toward maternal employment expressed both by children of parttime employed and unemployed mothers may have interesting implications for their own family and work decisions. The combination of low perceived beneficial effects and relatively low perceived detrimental effects suggests that children of parttime employed mothers may end up ambivalent about the desirability of maternal employment in their own adult lives. Similarly, the children of unemployed mothers, who see maternal employment as quite harmful yet somewhat beneficial for children, might face difficulty in resolving this issue in later years. In contrast, the children of fulltime employed mothers, who most perceived maternal employment as both beneficial and not harmful, should have a less conflicted decision about working in their own lives. In order to assess the relationship between these attitudes and future work expectations, the plans of the different work status groups were compared.

Frequencies completed on the variables concerning subjects' work expectations during their own children's infancy (birth to 1 1/2 years old) and preschool years (2 to 5 years old) revealed some interesting trends on the basis of maternal work status. Work expectation trends differed for female subjects as a function of their mothers' employment status. Female subjects were more likely to expect to work during their children's infancy and preschool years if their mothers had been employed fulltime. In contrast, female subjects whose mothers were employed parttime were least likely to expect to work during their children's infancy and preschool years. This is consistent with the aforementioned notion that these women may be more ambivalent about maternal employment. Female subjects whose mothers were not employed had expectations of working that fell in between the other two maternal work status groups. These work expectation trends correspond to the findings concerning subjects' scores on the "benefit" subscale of the BACMEC. It is not surprising that subjects who perceive maternal employment as more beneficial would expect to be employed themselves. Conversely, female subjects who viewed maternal employment as least beneficial would logically be least likely to work themselves. Subjects with unemployed mothers, who perceived maternal employment as somewhat beneficial, had moderately high expectations of working (despite their perception of the harmful consequences).

These differential work expectations of females based on maternal work status dissipated once children reached school age (6 years old). Once children were of school age, the great majority of female subjects expected to be working. With the children in school, it is not surprising that the majority of female subjects expect to take advantage of the opportunity to earn additional income for the family and participate in something that could improve their own emotional state or morale (Hoffman 1989). Even the daughters of mothers who had not been employed during their own schools years did not expect to stay at home once their children were in school.

Frequencies calculated for male subjects on the work expectation variables revealed that their mothers' work status did not affect their work expectations

during any stage of their children's development (birth to 18 years old); virtually all males expected continuous employment. Also, maternal work status did not affect male subjects' expectations of their spouse's working at any stage of their children's development. Hopefully, male subjects' expectations of their spouse's employment status will be the same as their wives' work expectations, otherwise there is a high probability that marital conflicts will arise. The following two conclusions have been made in past studies concerning marital conflicts arising out of maternal work status and husband's work expectations of his spouse. First, husbands have reported more arguments with and complaints from their working wives than did husbands with non-working wives. Experimenters suggested that this pattern may occur because their dual-earner lifestyles do not match their own expectations (Crouter, Perry-Jenkins, Huston and McHale 1987). Second, Kessler and McRae (1982) agree that an important variable in mediating marital conflicts is a match between husbands' preferences regarding both spouses' work status, especially if husbands believe in traditional sex role ideologies.

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